



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Vayikra/Zachor 5784

A Hale and Hearty Hate

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered March 9, 1973)

An eminent professor of the Hebrew University, who is an observant Jew, has developed a very quaint custom. It is based on the halakhah that Purim is observed throughout the world on the 14th day of Adar, but in those towns or cities which were walled since the days of Joshua's conquest of Canaan, Purim is observed on the 15th day of Adar. Hence, in Israel, while most of the country observes Purim tonight, 14 Adar, Jerusalem will begin its observance Sunday night, a day later, 15 Adar.

Now, our professor manages every year to spend the 14th of Adar in Jerusalem, and then towards evening he takes the trip to Tel Aviv to spend the 15th there. In that manner, he manages to avoid the observance of Purim without violating the Halakhah!

Why does he do this? Not because he is a fun-hating man of dour and cantankerous mien. Rather, on principle he objects to the hatred – against Haman and all anti-Semites – which we express on this festival.

The wielding of the “groggers” and the stamping, underneath all the obvious fun, are expressions of vindictiveness. Thus, this morning we read the פרשת עמלק, in which we proclaim anew the commandment to obliterate and erase the memory of Amalek from the world.

If this is so, is the professor right? Does Purim evoke hatred and aggressiveness against our enemies? And if so, doesn't this open the floodgates to hatred against real people, here and now? And is not hatred unreservedly evil and morally corrupting? And if so, should we not cancel our festivities scheduled for this evening?

No, I have no intention of calling off the reading of the Megillah tonight! On the contrary, our tradition teaches us that even if all the holidays will some day be nullified, Purim will always remain. The Megillah teaches:

ימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם
These days of Purim will never depart from amongst the

Jews and their memory will never cease from their descendants.

It is not at all true that it is absolutely wrong to hate. I am sorry that I have to disturb the prejudices that we have inherited in our liberal culture, reinforced by the Christian environment. There is a “kosher” kind of hatred, a hale and hearty hatred. Indeed, I am wary of people who cannot or never do not hate at all. I fear that they tend to fall into a far worse trap, into something far more debilitating than hatred, and that is – indifference. It was primarily indifference and not hatred that was the major and most corrupting vice of the Holocaust and from which we suffered.

There are three main points that should be made about our annual and lovely feast of hatred called Purim.

The first is a moral point. There are some ideas, certain movements and individuals, who simply deserve to be hated. Are we morally justified in hating Hitler and Himmler, Bormann and Eichmann, Stalin and Beria, Ahasuerus and Haman? No, we are not “justified.” We are compelled! A truly moral position does not allow us to react in any other way except hatred to such monsters. I am infinitely annoyed by the holier-than-thou attitude of those who act as if merely understanding the sociological and psychological circumstances of the perpetrator of a crime must automatically lead us to desist from judging or criticizing or hating him for his monstrous outrage. I do not care if Hitler was paranoid, or Stalin schizoid, or Ahasuerus retarded, or Haman genetically aggressive. They are all genocides, and they have forfeited their right to our compassion as well as their moral right to continued existence.

The second is a psychological point. Legitimate hatred has a cathartic value. It allows you to express your aggression and your enmity and hostility towards defined objects that are worthy of it, and then to relate to all others in a constructive manner. אוהבי ה' שנאו רע, “those who love God, hate, hate ye evil,” taught King David. Only if you

hate evil can you love God and the good.

It is told of the great scholar of some 300 years ago, Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschutz, the rabbi of Prague; one day he was accosted by the Bishop of Prague who challenged him with the usual Christian canard – is it not true that we Christians believe in the God of Love while you Jews worship the God of Vengeance? Yes, answered Rabbi Eibeschutz, it is quite true. You Christians worship love, so you feel free to hate. Whereas we Jews ascribe all vengeance to the Lord, so our lives can therefore be filled with love and understanding. Psychologically, therefore, it is dangerous to make a fetish of love and a taboo out of hatred, lest in effect we live the reverse kind of life.

Finally, there is a halakhic dimension which is quite remarkable. There is a halakhic requirement – to hate! Just as there is a mitzvah to love – whether God or neighbor or stranger – so there is a mitzvah to hate. For instance, we must hate Amalek. (Certainly, if we are to obliterate their memory, that would include hatred).

Moreover, just as there is a commandment not to hate, “thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart,” so there is a commandment *להשנא את הרשעים*, to hate the evil doers: *את משנאך ה' אשנא*, “those who hate Thee, O Lord, I shall hate.” The Halakhah requires us to orient ourselves with hatred towards *אפיקורסים מומרים*, towards heretics, apostates, and those who convert out of Judaism.

Now, that is harsh indeed, And yet, the Halakhah provides immediate correctives and restraints so that the practice is far different from the theory.

Thus, some authorities maintain that the commandment to destroy Amalek is operative only when the Amalekites refuse first to accept the seven commandments of the sons of Noah, the basic foundations of civilized life. Hence, it is not a genocidal commandment, but it means that we must do battle to those who are so uncivilized as to corrupt and destroy others. That is not, strictly speaking, a commandment to hate. Furthermore, the Talmud tells us that since the days of Sennacherib, we no longer know how to identify many ancient peoples, and hence the commandment to obliterate Amalek is performed by reading that chapter of the Torah, but can never be put into practice!

So, the Halakhah tells us that the commandment to hate the evil-doer is operative only after the sinner has rejected our rebuke. First we must perform the commandment of *הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך*, of reproving him or correcting him or informing him of his errors. Only after we have effectively done so, and the sinner remains a sinner, are we required

to hate him. However, the Tana'im have taught that already in their days *תוכחה* or moral preachment had become a lost art. There is no one left who knows how to do it. Hence, while we must always continue to strive to correct others, we must always assume that the failure is not in the sinner but in the preacher.

Thus, the late sage and saint, one of the greatest scholars of our own times, known by the title of his great work, the *חזון איש*, decides that in our times not only is it not required to hate the *רשע*, the evil-doer – but we are halakhically required to love him!

והיות ואין אנו יודעים להוכיח הרי זה אצלנו כקודם התוכחה ולכן מצוה לאהוב את הרשעים ... ועלינו להחזירם בעבותות האהבה ולהעמידם בעבותות האהבה ולהעמידם בקרן אורה במה שידינו מגעת.

Since we no longer know how to reprove the sinner properly, therefore every sinner must be regarded by us as one who has not yet been reprov'd. Hence, it is a mitzvah to love the evil-doers... we must strive to bring them back to Judaism with the bonds of love, to allow the rays of light to illuminate them to the extent that we are able.

But if, in effect, the Halakhah concludes with a ban on hating – not in principle, but in practice – what of the many positive aspects of hatred which we have discussed?

The answer is that the Jewish tradition has directed our venom and hostility to sin rather than the sinner. The great Beruriah, the wife of R. Meir, pointed out that David said specifically *יתמו חטאים מן הארץ*, may the *חטאים* (sins) – and not *חוטאים* (sinners) – be wiped off the earth. It is the sin and not the sinner who is the object of our derision and contempt.

Also, we do reserve our actual, living hatred for the unusually hateful individuals who commit historic crimes and whose malice is monstrous and premeditated. Anti-Semites who wish to destroy all the Jewish people; monsters who seek sadistically to wipe out whole populations – such people remain deserving, on purely moral grounds, of actual contempt and hatred.

And, of course, we are always bidden to release our hatred against the symbols of evil. And this is the basic motif of the commandment to read the portion of Amalek, and to observe the festival of Purim.

So, I want to teach my children to hate. I want them to know that there is a moral law which required that those who have placed themselves outside morality deserve not our love but our contempt. I want my children to have available for themselves the psychological relief in hating those who deserve it, so that they can relate to all others constructively and lovingly. I want them to be

halakhic Jews, and thus to handle hatred with extreme circumspection and caution and great care, and so in effect they will hate without hurt, and express their innate hostility towards evil by stamping and stomping and greggering Haman.

In conclusion, contrary to our friend the professor of whom we spoke, were I in Israel today, I would spend tonight in Tel Aviv and the day after in Jerusalem – observing Purim twice! If there were no Purim, we would have to invent it.

We must live our lives so that the commandment

I've Got to Be Me

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In the beginning of parshas Vayikra, God commands Moshe, “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, When a person (*adam*) from among you will bring an offering to God, from the animals, from the cattle and the sheep you shall bring your offering” (Vayikra 1:2). The Midrash Tanchuma points out that the word ‘*adam*’ is used, rather than ‘*ish*,’ which also means man, in order to serve as an allusion to Adam HaRishon, the first man in the world. The Torah is saying that when a person like Adam HaRishon, who was the first to sin, does sin, then he should bring a sacrifice as Adam did. One may ask why the Torah chose to make this allusion to the sin of Adam in our section, which refers to the ‘*korban olah*,’ which is a sacrifice that is completely burned on the altar, with the exception of its hide, which is given to the kohein. The rabbis tell us that an olah is brought for a sin of omission, meaning, the failure to perform a positive mitzvah, or the transgression of a prohibition that can be corrected by performing a positive mitzvah. Adam himself sinned by transgressing a negative mitzvah, the prohibition of eating from the tree of knowledge. Why, then, did the Torah allude to his sin in reference to the *korban olah*, rather than in regard to a *korban* which is brought for transgressing a prohibition? I believe that an understanding for the need to allude to Adam altogether can help answer this question, as well.

Rabbi Yosef Salant, in his commentary *Be'er Yosef*, explains that the purpose of alluding to Adam is to impress upon a person the magnitude of his own sin. When Adam sinned, he caused a change in the destiny of man. God told him that on the day he would eat from the tree, he would die. Actually he did not die on that day. The commentators, for example, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, explain that God was saying that when Adam sinned, he would be subject

of hatred, מצות שנאה, becomes the most difficult of all to observe. And by restricting our שנאה to evil and those who personify it and symbolize it by chanting the commandment to obliterate Amalek and by hissing and booing at the mention of Haman's name, we shall learn to act lovingly to all God's creatures. For this is the meaning of the Purim commandment משלוח מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאביונים – to express our friendship for all people, and especially gifts and love for the poor and the underprivileged.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

to death. As the rabbis say, when Adam ate from the tree, he subjected all of his descendents to death, thus changing the very nature of mankind. Rabbi Salant further cites Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin in his work *Nefesh HaChaim*, where he states that a person's actions have repercussions on the universe in a mystical way that we are not aware of. The Midrash Tanchumah, then, is telling us that the Torah wants us to keep the memory of Adam alive, in order to realize the universal implications of our actions, and appreciate how serious a thing it is to sin.

Although Rabbi Salant does not say this, I believe that the allusion to Adam's sin and its universal implications is especially meaningful within the context of the *mishkan*. A number of commentators explain the *mishkan* as being symbolic of the universe as a whole. When the Midrash tells us that within the process of bringing a *korban* in the *mishkan* we are to remind ourselves of Adam, I believe that it is telling a person to view the world as being created for him alone. This idea is articulated in the *mishnah* in *Sanhedrin*, which says that the reason for man being created as Adam, a single individual, is to point out the uniqueness of each person. Therefore, the *mishnah* concludes, a person is obligated to say that the world was created for him. As we have explained in the past, the idea behind this is that each person is unique, and is created at a certain time in history to carry out a mission that only he can do. In this sense the world really was created for him, in the sense of his unique task in life.

The Rambam, in his commentary to *Avos*, writes that if a person performs one mitzvah in a complete way, he merits a portion in the world to come. This does not mean that the person does not perform any other mitzvah. Rather, it means that he puts a special effort into performing a specific

mitzvoh, which he identifies with. The idea here is that the person has a unique draw to that particular mitzvoh, and sees within it an expression of what his task in life is. By putting in an extra effort to perform this mitzvoh in a complete way, he is expressing his unique self. Perhaps for this reason the midrash alludes to Adam specifically in regard to the korban olah. As we have explained, based on Rabbi Salant's comment, the allusion to Adam is a means of reminding each person of the universal repercussions of our action, of the idea that the world was created for him, that

he has a unique task to fulfill in this world. Although Adam's sin consisted in the transgression of a prohibition, the message is brought out more starkly in connection with the omission of a positive act, as an allusion to the unique task which each person was created to fulfill. When a person brings a korban olah to rectify this omission, he needs to remind himself of Adam, and thereby of the unique task he was created to perform in the world, which is symbolized by the mishkan, within which he brings that korban.

What About Shlamim?

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled, Parsha Bytes – Vayikra 5779, and presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on March 15, 2019)

In this week's Parsha—Vayikra—we learn about various kinds of korbanos. There are obligatory korbanos, such as Korban Chatas and Korban Asham which you bring if you did an aveirah. The other category of korbanos is called Nedavah—a free-will offering. Why would someone decide to bring a Nedavah? The purpose of Korban Olah—one type of Nedavah—seems clear, to atone for an aveirah. As the Torah writes in the fourth pasuk of Parshas Vayikra: Ve-nirtzah lo, le-chaper alav—and it shall be accepted for him to atone for him. And Rashi explains that it is mechaper specifically for aveiros asei.

But what about Korban Shlamim, another type of Nedavah? Why is it brought, and why is it named Shlamim? The Torah does not say whether it is mechaper. Rashi says in his second pshat that it brings shalom since everyone gets to partake. The Mizbe'ach, the Kohanim, and the owners all get to consume some part of the Shlamim. But why would one bring it?

This is a fundamental machlokes Rishonim. The Rambam writes in Hilchos Ma'aseh ha-Korbanos that there is something you must say when you do semicha on any of the Korbanos. When you bring Chatas, Asham, or Olah, you must say a vidui on the aveirah you did. But what about Shlamim? Since we do not find any speaking part in connection with Korban Shlamim anywhere in Shas, Rambam suggests: Yero'eh li—it seems to me—that you do not say a vidui on Shlamim. He says: When bringing Shlamim, one should say divrei shevach—since the purpose of the Shlamim is to praise and thank Hashem rather than because you did anything wrong or because of any lack in your ruchnius. This makes sense, since a Korban Todah—thanksgiving offering—is also a kind of Korban Shlamim, and we bring it to thank and praise Hashem. And

how do you praise Hashem? Perhaps the way to do this is to make shalom between the Mizbe'ach, the Kohanim, and the ba'alim—the owner. And because Hashem gave you many things, you share what He gave you and sing His praises. However, that is not the only opinion.

According to the Rash mi-Shantz, in his peirush on the Sifra, even when doing semicha on Korban Shlamim, you must say vidui on your aveiros. And Rashi explicitly says in Arachin (21a) that Olah and Shlamim are mechaprim on mitzvos asei. However, if so, how do you know whether to bring an Olah or a Shlamaim?

To explain why one would bring a Korban Shlamim, Netziv says an unbelievable chidush. You bring an Olah for a violation of an asei bein adam le-Makom. If you did not put on the tefillin, did not shake a lulav, or did not sit in the sukkah, for example. However, you bring Shlamim for violating an asei bein adam le-chaveiro, for not doing gemilus chasadim when you should have, for not treating people properly. That is why Korban Shlamim brings shalom le-Mizbe'ach, the Kohanim, and the ba'alim. You give part of your Shlamim to Hashem. You share it with Kohanim. And if you have a lot of meat, you also do chesed by sharing it with everyone. This explains the difference between the two korbanos. By bringing an Olah for violating an asei bein adam le-Makom, you give to Hashem and reorient your life priorities to ensure your actions are le-Shem Shomayim and not just for selfish motives. On the other hand, when you bring Shlamim for a violation of an asei bein adam le-chaveiro, you create shalom by sharing with people while also giving to Hashem—because every aveirah bein adam le-chaveiro is also an aveirah bein adam le-Makom. Any time you fight with or wrong another Jew, not only do you violate bein

adam le-chaveiro by not treating them well, but you also act against the will of Hashem. Therefore, to get kaparah, you must act favorably towards everyone and share with Hashem and other people. This way—when you go to the Beis ha-Mikdash—you remind yourself to readjust your priorities. On one hand, you need to live and act le-shem Shomayim by focusing on your relationship with Hashem

and not just on your selfish needs—exemplified by Korban Olah. Yet, on the other hand, you should not forget about your relationships with other people. And therefore you need to bring Shlamim to remind yourself to give to Hashem and other people, do chessed properly, and live be-shalom with everyone.

Shabbat Shalom.

Finding Your Calling

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Strangely,” Dr. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg notes, Leviticus “begins with an unnamed subject of revelation” (The Hidden Order of Intimacy). “And He called to Moses” (Lev. 1:1) doesn’t directly identify who is doing the initial calling. While it is safe to conclude from the following clause, “And God spoke to him,” that it was indeed God in the beginning clause as well, that fact is left implicit.

This unnamed calling, states the Lubavitcher Rebbe, points to a deep mystical teaching. The calling transcends standard dialogical contact and emanates from God’s Essence. Taking this idea one step further, the Lubavitcher Rebbe relates that this elusive and mysterious Divine voice did not just call out to Moses at one particular point in history but does so continually and constantly to each and every individual in each and every moment.

The meaning attained through hearing your personal call from God is powerful and palpable. Also building off the call of Vayikra, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes the ideal of how it feels when you merit finding your calling in life. You act upon the call from God “because you feel summoned to it. You feel this is your meaning and mission in life. This is what you were placed on earth to do” (“The Pursuit of Meaning,” Covenant & Conversation).

Yet, for many, finding their calling, purpose, or personal mission, is beset with confusion and frustration. How does one identify this call and answer it affirmatively?

Finding your calling, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm suggests, requires a mindset that searches for God’s messages, and interprets life through the lens of Divine Providence. Rashi, quoting a Midrash, notes that word Vayikra, “And he called” (Lev. 1:1), connotes an affectionate, dignified and intentional appeal. In contrast, the similar word Vayakar, which is used to describe God’s encounter with Balaam, denotes a casual, happenstance, and shameful call.

God’s calls to both Moses and Balaam were not dissimilar, Rabbi Lamm contends. It was their responses to the calls that were inherently different. Moses was attuned

to the signals and messages God was discreetly sending. This type of person “will view all of life as a divinely given opportunity for self-development and service. He will view the great events of existence as a challenge to which he must respond, a call to which he must answer. All of life becomes an active inspiring series of opportunities which can be seized and developed” (“Chance or Providence?,” Derashot Ledorot).

Another strategy to attune oneself to a calling is to be self-aware of one’s own internal desires, drives, and strengths. After the implicit call to Moses, God explicitly delineates the intricate details of the sacrificial services. The verse states that the sacrifice should be offered at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, “lirtzono,” before God (Lev. 1:3). Most translations assume lirtzono indicates that God will be pleased with a sacrifice. In an alternative explanation, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg suggests that the subject of the word lirtzono is not God, but the provider of the sacrifice. The person should offer the sacrifice with a strong ratzon, desire, and his actions should reflect and incorporate all the strengths embedded in his soul and personality.

Following this explanation, the ideal sacrifice requires self-awareness of one’s strengths, the deep, inner convictions that determine character, and the commitment of those skills and aptitudes towards the service of God. Perhaps it is the merging of one’s internal capabilities and will with God’s Will, identified through external spiritual and moral opportunities, that offers a path towards one’s calling.

Even with these suggestions, identifying one’s calling can still be a struggle. After all, God’s call is not explicit. A personalized Divine revelation with a clearly articulated mission is not common; it’s rare. Yet, if we strive to match our Divinely inspired internal gifts with the Divinely orchestrated external challenges and opportunities in our lives, we may indeed merit to hear and heed our own personalized Divine calling.

Why Korbanot?

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

As Sefer Vayikra begins, the Torah shifts from the Mishkan to the korbanot brought therein, and the modern reader asks: Why would we bring gifts of animals and grain to an immortal, unhungry G-d? The question isn't new; in the 16th century, Rabbi Moshe Isserless compiled a list of no fewer than 14 different approaches to explain korbanot, employing rational, philosophical, and mystical schools of thought. [See Torat haOlah, Introduction to Part 2.]

The Rambam suggested that korbanot are educational, undermining the idolatry of our neighbors. Regional powers of the biblical era served sheep, goats and cattle, and therefore Hashem commanded us to bring those creatures as korbanot to Hashem. (Moreh HaNevuchim 3:46)

But Ramban (Vayikra 1:6) argued that non-Jews didn't worship the actual animals, but the cosmological forces they represented, and that using those animals as korbanot would actually honor those forces. We would send a stronger message by eating those animals, not sacrificing them in a sacred setting! Further, Hashem accepted the korbanot of Hevel and Noach long before there were any regional idolatries!

Rather, Ramban contended that korbanot are meant for

atonement. He wrote, "One who sins should bring an offering, leaning his hands on it to represent actions, verbally confessing to represent speech, burning the innards on the fire to represent the organs of thought and desire, and [burning] the legs to represent the arms and legs which perform all of a person's work, and placing the blood on the altar to represent the blood of his life. One who does all of this will contemplate that he sinned against his G-d with his body and life, and it would be appropriate for this blood to be spilled and his own body to be burned, if not for the kindness of the Creator" who accepted the korban instead. But Ramban himself described this idea as "appealing" rather than "correct." Among its flaws: Some korbanot are about thanks and celebration, not forgiveness!

Perhaps the simplest and clearest benefit of the korban comes in another, brief comment by Ramban: "Every reference to korban is an expression of *kreivah* [intimacy] and unity." In other words: We give of ourselves to voice our desire to become close to Hashem.

Our neighbors of today do not worship livestock, and we have grown accustomed to atoning without a korban, but we still seek ways to feel close to Hashem. Until we again have a Beit HaMikdash, may we find other ways to give of ourselves, and thereby draw close to Hashem.

Remember, Do Not Forget

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

The Shabbos before Purim is known as Shabbos Parshas Zachor, and before we celebrate the miraculous redemption and salvation of Purim, we remember Haman m'zerah Amalek, and what he planned to do to Am Yisrael. To fulfill the mitzvah d'Oraisa of Zachor, we will all listen to these ancient, yet timelessly relevant, words read aloud, and fulfill - with intent - the mitzvah of remembering, so that we shall never forget.

זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְךָ עֲמָלֵק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם.

You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt.

אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בְּךָ כָּל הַנֶּחֱשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ וְאַתָּה עָיֵף וְיָגֹעַ וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים.

That he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear G-d.

וְהָיָה בְּהִנָּיִחַ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ מִכָּל אֹיְבֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

נָתַן לְךָ נִחְלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה אֶת זִכְרֵ עֲמָלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח.

And it will be, when the Hashem grants you respite from all your enemies around in the land which the Hashem gives to you as an inheritance to possess, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget (Devarim 25:17-19).

At the time of the attack of Amalek against Am Yisrael, Hashem commanded Moshe (Shemos 17:14): כָּתֹב זֹאת: כִּי-מָחָה אֶמְחָה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עֲמָלֵק, וְכָרוֹן בַּסֵּפֶר וְשִׁים, בְּאָזְנֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ: Hashem said to Moshe, Inscribe this as a memorial in the book, and place it into the ears of Yehoshua, that I will surely obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens.

The Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l, teaches, "The eternity of the Jewish nation is based upon continuity, and this continuity in turn is based mainly on memory. Here lies the fundamental difference between the non-

Jewish world and the Jewish nation. The world etches its history on tablets, stones, statues and pyramids, while our cultural history is based primarily on memory. At the same time that Moshe commanded Yehoshua to write, he also commanded him to remember. While the modern world suffers from memory deficit, our attaining the State of Israel is thanks to the eternal memory of Knesses Yisrael" (Chumash Masores Ha'Rav, Shemos, p.143).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes, "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt - The nation as one unit (*lecha* - to you) was *ba'derech*, on the road, preoccupied with thoughts and worries far from war. It was a journey of a homeless multitude traveling in the wilderness with women and children, and one would expect that their plight would arouse in every human heart only humane sympathy, not hostility. And each one of you had experienced and become aware of the invisible G-d, Who broke the bonds of each individual and released him from Egyptian slavery, a fact that, one would think, should have served to protect and shield the unprotected among you against any wanton attack ... That he chanced upon you on the way - You were just proceeding on your way, and you had no reason to assume that an enemy would attack you. His attack was entirely unprovoked and was strictly the result of bloodthirstiness; or perhaps he sensed the threat posed to him by your entry into history, for you represent the pure humane principle of faithfulness to duty, which contradicts his principle of the power of the sword" (Commentary of RSRH to Devarim 25:17-18).

Every morning at the cemetery in Kadima-Zoran in central Israel, Yaakov Lubinevsky, 99 years old, moves slowly using his scooter together with his caregiver Anna. He comes here every day to visit the grave of his late wife, Mazel. In recent months, he has also been visiting the graves of the late Staff Sergeant Yaron Shay and Staff Sergeant Ofek Russo, HYD.

"Two years ago I lost my wife, Mazal, age of 93. I come here and I tell her what's going on in our family, what's going on in the country, sit with her as long as necessary, water the flowers until Anna tells me that we have to move," he says.

Yaakov is a veteran resident of Kadima-Zoran, small in stature, still lucid. He worked for years as a forest ranger. In recent months, he has also moved between the graves of the two IDF soldiers who were killed at the beginning of the war.

"In the beginning, it was just the grave of Yaron, who

served in the Nahal reconnaissance unit and was killed on the first day of the war defending Kerem Shalom. He is the son of former government minister Izhar Shay, an amazing person in my eyes. The day after Yaron was killed, another hero warrior, Ofek Russo, who fell in Kibbutz Be'eri, was buried. Both were 21 years old, at the beginning of their careers, young men who went to war and never returned," he says.

Yaakov describes his daily routine. "The first thing I do every morning after I visit my wife's grave is to come here, to the military section. I water the pots next to the two graves of the heroes, arrange the pictures if they fell in the wind, arrange the stones, so that everything remains as it is. Even if one of the beer bottles on Yaron's grave falls, I of course make sure to put it back in place."

"It's a terrible situation for the families, for the friends," Yaakov says, "I'm here all the time, taking care of them as if they were my sons. I 'adopted' these two fallen soldiers' graves. We must be here, helping their families. The pain is great, but life must go on. I will make sure to tell everyone who Yaron and Ofek were."

Yaakov says he has five children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. "I try to encourage the families of the fallen," he says, "I want to help them start living a little, after all, their lives were completely shattered after the terrible disaster. I say that there is a point in getting up in the morning, that there is a point in life. You can be proud of your sons, in the way you taught them to be heroes, young fighters who fell in defense of the country. I am proud to talk about these two soldiers. Look at how many photos their friends have arranged here, they are greatly appreciated."

Former minister Izhar Shay praised Lubinevsky over the weekend in a social media post: "Yaakov is a Holocaust survivor. He lost his entire family in the inferno and arrived in Israel alone after his entire world fell apart. And here he somehow managed to pull himself up, marry and start a family. And live a full life, maybe even a happy one. He knows the price and the horror of life. And he told us the very first time we met: 'It hurts terribly, the most painful thing in the world. But know that there is a reason to live, there is something for your Yaron and for you, always remember, there is a reason to live'" (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/b1msc5bca>).

You shall remember, *zachor* ... you shall not forget, *lo tish'kach*.

Rav Soloveitchik on Vayikra: Polishing the Soul

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

The Torah requires a person who has unintentionally committed certain sins to bring a chatat, a sin-offering, and in a case of doubt a kind of guilt-offering known as an asham talui. If the sin was unwitting, though, why is an offering necessary, why must atonement be made?

The Ramban explained that it is because “all iniquities disgrace the soul, and they are a blemish on it, so that it does not merit receiving the countenance of its Creator until it is pure (טהורה) of sin.” That accounts for why of the many possible words to use for “man” (such as אָדָם or אִישׁ) the verse chooses one that also refers to the soul: “When a person/soul (נַפֶּשׁ) sins unintentionally” (Leviticus 4:2). Even if forgiveness for unintentional transgression could be granted without a sacrifice, the stain on the soul would still remain. Sin taints us whether we know it or not.¹ This basic insight about the spiritual rot sin causes informs Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s account of sin and its expiation as well.

Sin and Psyche

Every sin we commit, the Rav said, has two consequences: the liability for punishment delineated by the Torah or the Sages, and the detrimental spiritual effect on us. The latter is not a punishment but the reality brought on by sin:

*The moment a person sins he lessens his own worth, brings himself down and becomes spiritually defective, thus foregoing his former status. [...] This is not a form of punishment, or a fine, and is not imposed in a spirit of anger, wrath, or vindictiveness. It is a “metaphysical” corruption of the human personality, of the divine image of man.*²

This is borne out by two episodes in the Torah.

After Kayin killed his brother Hevel, God said to him: “Why are you distressed, why has your countenance fallen? Surely, if you improve, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door” (Genesis 4:6-7). The Ramban elaborated that his sin was followed by shame, and that God was telling him that if he did not repent his sin would set itself by the door to his house, causing him to stumble in all his endeavors.³ In other words, sin brings psychological distress, disquietingly intrudes on one’s personal space, and impedes spiritual progress.

Much later, as a consequence of the golden calf, God said He Himself would not travel in the midst of the Jewish

people. “The people heard this bad news and mourned” (Exodus 33:4). The Rav observed:

In the wake of sin comes a strong feeling of sorrow. The previous day they had engaged in wild, joyous celebration around the calf, but now they felt the bitter sorrow of mourning. [...]

*What does the sinner mourn? He mourns that which he irretrievably lost.⁴ What has he lost? Everything. The sinner has lost his purity, his holiness, his integrity, his spiritual wealth, the joy of life, the spirit of sanctity in man; all that gives meaning to life and content to human existence.*⁵

Atonement versus Purification

In line with the dual notion of sin articulated above, the Rav distinguished between atonement (כַּפָּרָה) and purification (טְהוּרָה). Such a distinction is in fact reflected in the language used to describe Yom Kippur: “For on this day He shall provide atonement (יִכַּפֵּר) for you to purify (לְטַהֵר) you; from all your sins before the Lord shall you be purified (תִּטְהַר)” (Leviticus 16:30). How do they differ?

The root of the word for atonement (כ-פ-ר) helps to explain its role. The cover (כַּפֹּת) on the ark served to protect what was inside, and in the same way atonement protects us from punishment.⁶ Rashi observed that “whenever the term kapparah is used in connection with a matter of trespass and sin ... it has the connotation of wiping away and removal.”⁷ Therefore, when a Jew fulfills the requirements of repentance and, if required, brings a sacrifice, he or she is protected from punishment and the liability is removed.⁸

It was Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi’s opinion that Yom Kippur is so inherently powerful that even those who have not repented receive atonement.⁹ The Rav understood this to be due to the proximity of God. One might think that being forgiven requires spiritually cleansing oneself first. But on Yom Kippur God cannot wait any longer, as it were, and he calls out to us, visits our homes, and purifies us Himself. “Who purifies you?” Rabbi Akiva asked rhetorically. “God is the mikveh of Yisrael” (Jeremiah 17:13).¹⁰ God wants us to be close to Him, and so forgives in a fashion far more expedient than usual.¹¹

The Rav was quick to point out, however, that the day’s power, when “the king is in the field,” is limited to atonement. Wiping away cleans and protects a surface, it is not a deep cleansing. Purification is of necessity

thoroughgoing and requires much more elbow grease, though of course it remains within reach. It demands “a complete breaking away from the environment, from the contributing factors, and all the forces which created the atmosphere of sin.”¹² One must embark on sincere soul-searching and really transform into a new person, and this can be the work of a lifetime. For the vast majority of mortals it cannot be achieved in a single day, no matter how close God is and how much we yearn to change.

Purification is what God truly desires of us, for us. A leitmotif in the Torah’s description of sacrifices is that they are a pleasing aroma to God (רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ לַיהוָה). This appears already when Noah offers his sacrifice (Genesis 8:21) and continues throughout the rest of the Torah. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg commented that what pleases God is not the aroma of the sacrifice wafting to Heaven, so to speak, but the scent of a freshly laundered soul.¹³

The achievement of purification, claimed the Rav, can be felt. God told the Jewish people: “I have erased your sins as a haze and your transgressions as a vanished cloud; return to me for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22). The Rav elucidated the figurative imagery:

*The erasure of sin resembles the dissipation and disappearance of the clouds which obscures the shining sun. When a man achieves repentance of purification, all the clouds above disperse and he feels the pure rays of the sun shining upon him and his entire being is permeated with: “For I have redeemed you.”*¹⁴

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

How can we strengthen our inner resolve to successfully refrain from sin? One traditional recommendation is to remind ourselves that the heavenly court keeps tabs on our transgressions: “Reflect on three things and you will avoid transgression... that you will give an account and

reckoning....”¹⁵ All of us will ultimately stand in judgment before our Maker. For those with powerful imaginations, picturing this scene in the mind’s eye is effective; for others, it is too removed from reality for its immediacy to be felt.

Perhaps the Rav’s treatment of sin and repentance proves helpful here. To sin is to cause harm to our psyche and emotional wellbeing. Knowing the anguish that will follow, the guilt and the melancholy that become our bedfellows, may help convince us to steer clear of such ruinous conduct. Aside from the reflex of avoiding pain, we also naturally gravitate towards that which brings us pleasure and joy. Frowns turn to smiles when the sun breaks through the clouds and glints on our sparkling, polished souls.

1. Ramban on Leviticus 4:2.
2. Soloveitchik, On Repentance, 52.
3. Ramban on Genesis 4:7.
4. Similarly, in his Aderet Eliyahu, the Vilna Gaon understood God’s question to Adam in the wake of the sin, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9), to mean, “What has happened to you? Look at what you have lost.” The emphasis is on sin’s disastrous effect on man.
5. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 2:296–297.
6. The very first time the root appears is when Noah is told “and cover (וְכַפֵּרְתָּ) [the ark] with pitch” (Genesis 6:14). Here, too, it indicates a protective layer.
7. Rashi on Genesis 32:21, quoted and translated in Soloveitchik, On Repentance, 51.
8. Soloveitchik, On Repentance, 50–51.
9. Yoma 85b.
10. Mishnah, Yoma, 8:9.
11. Soloveitchik, Yemei Zikaron, 242–243.
12. Soloveitchik, On Repentance, 56.
13. Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabalah on Leviticus 1:9, s.v. רִיחַ נִיחֻחַ.
14. Soloveitchik, On Repentance, 66.
15. Pirkei Avot, 3:1.

Hating as a Mitzvah

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Since the festival of Purim will be celebrated this coming Saturday night and Sunday, March 23rd and 24th, this week’s Torah portion, parashat Vayikra, is followed by an additional Torah reading known as “Parashat Zachor.” Parashat Zachor, excerpted from Deuteronomy 25:17–19, contains the biblical commandment of remembering the evil enemy nation of Amalek. This Torah portion is regarded as so important that every Jewish man and woman is mandated to listen to

the live reading of this vital Torah portion.

Parashat Zachor opens with the resounding words, זְכוֹר, אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָךְ עַמְלֵק, בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם, *Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt!* The Torah relates that Amalek (a nation descended from Esau), without cause or provocation, attacked the Israelite nation whom G-d had miraculously liberated from slavery in Egypt. Afraid to attack the strongest tribes of Israel, the Amalekites dastardly struck those who were hindmost,

weak, faint and exhausted. The parasha concludes with the inspiring Divine prophecy that a day will yet come when G-d will give the Jewish people rest from all their enemies in the land of Israel. On that fateful day, the Torah adjures the People of Israel, *תִּמְחָה אֶת זֵכֶר עָמְלֶךָ, מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם, לֹא תִשְׁכַּח*, *Eradicate the memory of Amalek from under the heaven. Never forget!*

According to tradition, Haman was a direct descendent of the nation of Amalek. In Samuel I 15:3, we learn that the prophet Samuel instructs King Saul to do battle and eliminate the Amalekites and their king, Agag. But, King Saul had mercy on Agag, and in those last few moments of his life, Agag impregnates a woman, whose descendants, many generations later, eventually sired Haman. The Midrash in Kohelet Rabbah 7:16, boldly declares that “One who has compassion at a time when they should be cruel, will eventually be cruel at a time that they should be compassionate.”

In February 2003, the highly acclaimed scholar, Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik, penned an essay in the Christian theological journal *Present Tense*, entitled *The Virtue of Hate*. In this essay, Rabbi Soloveichik argues, that while Christian theology supports forgiveness for everyone—even for the most thoroughly wicked human beings, Judaism maintains that forgiveness may be withheld from such detestable and murderous human beings as Hitler, Stalin or Osama Bin Laden. Dr. Soloveichik’s essay caused a great stir in both the Jewish and Christian intellectual communities. To some Jewish scholars, it aroused visions of the old calumny that the “Christian god” is a god of love, while the Old Testament God is a God of anger and vengeance.

To be sure, Prof. Soloveichik’s arguments are technically correct. Unfortunately, he fails to put these valid arguments within a proper context. Clearly, Judaism recognizes that there are instances when a person is deemed to have passed the point of “no return,” of ever meriting salvation, and is consequently destined to oblivion, which in Judaism means that their soul is cut off and ceases to exist. But, reaching that point of oblivion is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible to reach. Very few human beings, who are all “created in the image of G-d,” will ever merit that fate, or reach that point. Unfortunately, Professor Soloveichik’s essay leaves the reader with the incorrect impression that there may be many who fall into this category, and that qualifying for “oblivion” is not all that difficult.

To the contrary, Judaism does theological somersaults in order to find merit even for the most hard-core wicked.

In his essay, Dr. Soloveichik correctly cites the famous Talmudic Midrash (tractate Sanhedrin, 39b), that tells how the Al-mighty silenced the Jews who sang at the splitting of the Red Sea: “My creatures are drowning in the waters, and you sing praises to Me?” It is for that reason as well, that Jews do not recite the full Hallel after the first two days of Passover.

In fact, there are many rituals and customs that underscore the mercifulness of G-d and his People toward their enemies, even mortal enemies. When the list of the ten plagues is chanted at the Passover seder, it is customary for the celebrants to remove a drop of wine for each plague, for we may not rejoice when our enemy falls. Even when attacking the inhabitants of ancient Canaan who refused to abide by the basic Seven Noahide Principles of “Thou shalt not murder,” the ancient Israelites were required to greet their enemies in peace, and were forbidden to besiege the enemy city on all four sides, allowing a route for the enemies to escape (Maimonides, Laws of Kings, Chap. 6). Furthermore, rabbinic tradition (Rashi Numbers 26:11, Ibn Ezra Numbers 6:23, Talmud, Gittin 57b) has it that although Korach was swallowed up by the earth, his children repented, and that the prophet Samuel was a great grandson, and even that some of the descendants of Haman eventually converted to Judaism and taught Torah in B’nai Brak.

While it may be “virtuous” to hate ultimate evil, Judaism’s perceptions of hating evil are far from cut and dry. Does G-d not know that the men who built the tower of Babel are frightfully evil? Is not the whole world aware that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were the most wicked humans on the face of the earth? And, yet, scripture, in both instances (Genesis 11:5 and 18:21), depicts G-d as having to come down from heaven to see the peoples’ evil, to inspect the evil with His own eyes, thus teaching the lesson that human courts of law must spare no effort in their investigations of people suspected of evil (see Rashi cf.). If G-d can come down from heaven in order to see what the people of the Tower of Babel did and what the people of Sodom and Gomorrah did, then human beings of flesh-and-blood who sit in judgment of others, must likewise exhaust every possible venue before condemning anyone as evil.

Our Talmud (Berachot 28b), tells us that only one scholar, Shmuel Hakatan, Samuel the Small, was great enough (that is, humble enough) to compose the prayer for our enemies, the nineteenth benediction of the Amidah. After all, our scriptures, in Psalms 104:35, concludes: *תִּמְחָה*

וְשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם מִן-הָאָרֶץ, *let the evil be extirpated from the earth, and there will be no more evil people.* Consequently, we Jews pray for the destruction of the evil in people, and only then, as a last resort, only after we have exhausted every other avenue of repentance, do we pray for the destruction of the evil people themselves!

The brother of the Chazon Ish, was once challenged. After all, his questioners asked, the Torah (Exodus 34:6-7) enumerates 13 attributes of G-d's mercy. But the final attribute is (Exodus 34:7) וְנִקְהָה, לֹא יִנְקָה, *and He will not forgive.* If we are to imitate G-d and His mercifulness, then

we must also imitate G-d's lack of forgiveness. The scholar responded very insightfully: If a human being's vengeance is preceded by 12 qualities of mercy, then a human may be vengeful as well.

The Al-mighty and His human creations may punish evildoers, but only if the punishment is the last and final resort. While Judaism does countenance the ultimate punishment of those who are thoroughly evil, it does not countenance wanton hatred, and does not view hatred as a mitzvah. Simply stated, semantics aside, there is no way to ascribe any "virtue" to hatred in Judaism.

Making "Margins" in Our Lives

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Sefer Vayikra begins with Hashem calling to Moshe from inside the newly-constructed Mishkan: וִיקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה, וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֵלָיו.

Rashi, citing the Midrash, comments: לְכָל דְּבָרוֹת וּלְכָל – Hashem called Moshe by name each time He spoke with him, before conveying to him the information that he wished to communicate. The pasuk says וִיקְרָא...וַיְדַבֵּר, Rashi adds, to clarify that God called out to Moshe only to introduce דִּבְרוֹר, before speaking to him, but not to introduce the הַפְסְקוֹת – the "breaks." Rashi proceeds to explain that when Hashem dictated the Torah to Moshe, He made pauses, in order לִיתֵּן רוּחַ לְמֹשֶׁה לְהִתְבּוֹנֵן בֵּין פֶּרֶשָׁה לְפֶרֶשָׁה וּבֵין עֲנִיִּין לְעֲנִיִּין – to allow Moshe the opportunity to think about and process the material. The Torah writes וִיקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר to clarify that the קריאה, the calling of Moshe's name, was necessary only before Hashem spoke to Moshe, but was not needed before the הַפְסְקוֹת, before the silent breaks.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe, in *Shiurei Chumash*, writes that Rashi's comments here demonstrate to us the vital importance of התבוננות, thought and contemplation, the need to process and assimilate what we learn. We cannot be constantly running from one thing to the next without taking some time to pause and think about what we are doing. We need הַפְסְקוֹת, regular periods when we stop to think and contemplate. Rav Wolbe notes the Midrash's implication that we might have considered requiring a קריאה to introduce even the breaks. The הַפְסְקוֹת are so significant that intuitively, we might have equated them with the actual דִּבְרוֹר, to the extent that God would have to specifically call Moshe's name to introduce the pauses. This shows that the pauses are no less crucial a part of the learning process than the actual learning. We need to take

time to digest and process what we learn so it is properly understood, internalized, and put into practice.

Every book that is ever published has margins around the text, on every page. There are margins above, below, and on both sides of the text. If the text would begin right at the top of the page, and continue all the way to the very bottom, and the lines would begin all the way on the edge of the page and continue to the very end, the text would be unreadable. Margins are provided not only for aesthetics, but also because we need margins to give our minds an opportunity to absorb and assimilate the material we read.

This concept is expressed in halacha. Every letter of the Sefer Torah must be completely surrounded by empty space; if two adjacent letters are connected, even slightly, at a single, tiny point, the Sefer Torah is disqualified. One explanation of this halacha is that each Jew has a corresponding letter in the Torah, and we must each recognize our individuality. No one should encroach upon his fellow's territory, or try to be like somebody else; every person has a distinct, unique role, and we must embrace our individual roles without trying to be just an extension of somebody else. Additionally, however, this halacha expresses the notion of הַפְסְקוֹת, the importance of allowing "empty space" in our lives, time to think, reflect, contemplate, and assimilate our knowledge and our experiences.

The Midrash describes the Torah as having been given with both "black fire" and "white fire." Rav Kook explains:

Extra space is left blank to separate sections of the Torah. The Sages explained that these separations allowed Moshe to reflect upon and absorb the previous lesson. In other words, the white fire corresponds to the loftier realm of thought and contemplation. The black fire of the letters, on the other hand, is the revelation of intellect into the realm of language — a

contraction and limitation of abstract thought into the more concrete level of speech. (Shemuos Ha'Re'iyah, 4)

Besides the “black fire,” the actual information, we require “white fire” – the opportunity to think about and absorb this information.

This is an especially crucial message for our generation. Our lives are incredibly pressured and fast-paced. We are constantly rushing from one thing to the next. Few of us are able to put down our phones for הפסקות, so that we can

Remembering Amalek

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

This coming Shabbat, Jewish communities around the world will read Parshat Zachor, in fulfillment, according to many opinions, of the biblical obligation to remember Amalek's attack on the Jewish people as they journeyed through the wilderness. This passage in the Torah has always posed interpretative and ethical questions, yet all this has taken on new meaning in the context of the ongoing war.

Tembeka Ngcukaitobi, the lawyer who recently served on the South African legal team charging Israel with genocide, claimed in his statement that “The Prime Minister's invocation of ‘Amalek’ is being used by soldiers to justify the killing of civilians, including children.” While the referenced statement by PM Netanyahu only cited the obligation to remember the deeds of Amalek, in a manner no different from the Hague's very own Holocaust memorial, as noted in a clarification issued by the Prime Minister's Office, this and other incidents have thrown the question of Amalek and its contemporary relevance into the limelight.

For us, as Jews committed to Torah and mitzvot as well as to the security and flourishing of the modern State of Israel, what do we make of this element of the Torah, which has contributed to accusations against us over the past few months?

At face value, the obligation to annihilate Amalek cannot be fulfilled today, since King Sancheriv, as described by Chazal, “shuffled the nations” and caused us to permanently lose track of the authentic descendants of Amalek and other ancient nations (Mishna Yadayim 4:4). Nonetheless, Maimonides views the destruction of Amalek as a Biblical commandment.

In his *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik claims there remains an application of the mitzva of Amalek in the modern day context. Citing his father,

think and contemplate. We need to have the ability to turn off all the background noise, to be alone with our thoughts without the distraction and stimulation of our screens. In order for us to properly utilize and implement the אש שחורה (“black fire”), the actual content and information that we learn, we must make time for the אש לבנה (“white fire”), for processing and assimilating everything we learn so it becomes part of our beings and informs all our decisions and all our actions.

Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, he contends that Amalek is not merely a nation from the biblical period, but rather “any group infused with mad hatred that directs its enmity against the community of Israel” (footnote 23). Amalek is not a matter of the past - on the contrary, the notion of defending the Jewish people from those who wish us harm remains in full force.

Significantly, though, Rabbi Soloveitchik clarifies that the application of Amalek today does not entail total annihilation of a people, particularly those not directly involved in attacking Israel. On the contrary, it is to wage a just and moral war against those who seek to destroy us.

This is, by Rabbi Soloveitchik's account, the modern Amalek paradigm: simply a directive to fight a defensive war, in a manner consistent with the Torah's view of “just warfare,” against our sworn enemies.

As we have seen in these past few months, the IDF has taken extreme precautions to minimize the civilian toll of the war - sending evacuation warnings, opening and maintaining humanitarian corridors, and fighting not only with courage, but also with conscience and caution. Agree or disagree: all of us living in Israel know of soldiers who have been injured or have tragically fallen while upholding the exemplary moral standard of the IDF. There is a contemporary application to Amalek that we will read about on Shabbat - it is Hamas combatants alone, and not the entirety of the population of Gaza. No one wishes for the death or injury of innocent civilians. Hamas are solely and squarely to blame for this war - and for all of its tragic consequences.

Some rabbinic scholars have questioned Rabbi Soloveitchik's approach. Rabbi Nachum Rabinovich, in his *Melumdei Milchama*, argues, based on his own careful reading of Rambam, that Rabbi Soloveitchik's claim should be read homiletically, rather than halakhically. It is both

halakhically tenuous and morally and politically dangerous, argues R. Rabinovich, to assign the role of Amalek to other enemies of the Jewish people, and he cites R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook as having the same assessment of Rabbi Soloveitchik's position. Similarly, R. Eliezer Melamed warns against identifying any contemporary group or movement with the halakhic category of Amalek.

Even so, these rabbinic voices find in Rabbi Soloveitchik's homiletic interpretation of Amalek a sober reminder to us, that we must stand up to those who attack the weak and the uninvolved, and who seek our wholesale annihilation.

In our loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish nation, we insist on fighting in accordance with the Torah's moral approach to warfare. I am in awe of our soldiers for their bravery on the battlefield, and consistently inspired by the

morality they carry with them despite the tremendous physical and emotional challenges this war has brought upon them. If Hamas would lay down their weapons and return our brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents still in Gaza – tomorrow the humanitarian crisis would be over. If the IDF would lay down its arms, tomorrow Israel could God forbid be annihilated and World Jewry would be put in perilous danger. That is the description of Hamas, of Amalek.

This Shabbat, the same Torah that asks of us multiple times to protect and care for the downtrodden and persecuted commands us to also remember that evil exists in the world. We must name it and, even at great sacrifice, root it out. Our historical consciousness stays with us, even as we commit ourselves to the Torah's principles of moral integrity and justice.

Finding the Shalom in the Shelamim

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

Among the various sacrifices listed in Parshat Vayikra is the '*shelamim*' (Vayikra 3:1-17) which is an offering brought by an individual to express thanks to God.

In general, '*shelamim*' is translated as 'peace offering' because, as Rashi explains (Vayikra 3:1) while quoting the Torat Kohanim, 'the [*shelamim*] bring peace into the world', or alternatively, because 'there is peace in [the *shelamim*] for the altar, the kohanim and the owner' – meaning that the sacrifice is divided by three, expressing a fair and peaceful distribution.

Interestingly, the Zohar (Vayikra 11:1) understands the *shelamim* differently, noting that it represents peace 'both for the upper and lower realms.' In fact, the Zohar goes so far as to say that the unique expression of peace of the *shelamim* is so special that, 'of all the offerings, none are so beloved to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as the *shelamim*.' This itself may be why both Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonatan refer to the *shelamim* as 'offerings of holiness.'

However, as Rav Zalman Sorotzkin explains (in his *Oznayim LaTorah*, Vayikra 3:1), while the *shelamim* is a special and holy sacrifice, 'the *shelamim* is of lesser holiness' (*kodshim kalim*). This is because, 'it may be eaten even outside the Temple Courtyard' and anywhere in the city of Jerusalem by any person (see Mishna Zevachim 5:7). Given this, why, asks Rabbi Sorotzkin, should the *shelamim*, which is of lesser sanctity, be so beloved to God?

In answering this question, Rav Sorotzkin explains that

among the various categories of *shelamim* is the thanks-offering brought by those who have been spared from a life-threatening situation. 'Generally, when an individual feels that God has performed wonders for them, they are moved to bring a peace-offering of thanks... and they then invite a large gathering of people and joyfully recount and share with them the many wondrous deeds which God performed for them. Our Sages often spoke about the special value of thanks, pointing out that the other offerings are brought because of sins: the sin-offering, the guilt-offering, and even the elevation-offering... As the Midrash explains, 'Therefore the Holy One, Blessed is He, says: "It is more beloved to Me than all other offerings". King David exclaims, "He who brings a thanks-offering will honour Me" (Tehillim 50:23) – both in this world and the next' (Midrash Tanchuma, Tzav 7).

What this teaches us is that the *shelamim* helps bring us closer to God and to each other. Yes, the *shelamim* may be less 'holy' as it can be eaten anywhere in the holy city. However, the reason for this is to ensure that as many people as possible can partake in the *shelamim*. So though it technically has lesser sanctity as a sacrifice, it is also more beloved by God.

Having mentioned Parshat Vayikra and the *shelamim* offering, it seems fitting to reference the extra Maftir which we will be reading this Shabbat, Parshat Zachor, which reminds us that while we value life and pursue goodness in this world, there are others who venerate death and who

wish to bring destruction to the world.

As Parshat Zachor makes clear, we don't forget those who have sought to harm us, and we won't forgive those who have caused us harm. At the same time, what we learn

from the shelamim is the value of doing what we can to see good in the world, to thank God for the blessings we have been bestowed, and to pursue peace wherever possible.

The Role and Purpose of KorbanosThe Korbanos

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

There is a famous dispute between two of the great Rishonim regarding how to understand the purpose of the korbanos commanded by the Torah:

- The Rambam writes that korbanos were a form of concession to the people who were not able to conceive of religious worship that did not involve sacrifices. In order that they would fully be able to relate to Judaism, and thereby completely disassociate themselves from other religious systems, the Torah provided a program of korbanos.¹
- The Ramban strenuously disagrees with the above approach, insisting that korbanos are of intrinsic value, playing a central role in harmonizing the cosmic spiritual forces and different levels of Creation,² and are not merely preventative or concessional in nature.³

Harmony: Bamos and the Beis Hamikdash

The Meshech Chochmah, in his Introduction to Chumash Vayikra, suggests a middle approach to the offering of korbanos, into which both of the above opinions can be incorporated, depending on the setting in which they are being offered:

The Torah commands that there be a central place of worship – initially the Mishkan and ultimately the Beis Hamikdash – where korbanos are to be offered as part of the avodah. The korbanos offered there are achieve the effect of harmonizing the cosmic forces of creation, as discussed by the Ramban.

However, under certain circumstances, the Torah also allows for the making of a private altar, known as a *bamah*. The korbanos offered on these altars do not achieve the abovementioned spiritual effects, and are provided purely in order to distance the people from the pagan practices of others, as discussed by the Rambam.

Resonance in Rishonim and Chazal

The Meshech Chochmah enlists support for this basic approach from another of the Rishonim, the Ralbag who,

in his commentary to sefer Melachim,⁴ writes as follows:

The intention [of korbanos] is one of the secrets of Creation, which can be fathomed by those who are dedicated for purposes of this Divine service, after much contemplation. Yet this effect will only be achieved if the service is performed by the kohanim.⁵ However Hashem allowed each person to do as he sees fit, to offer [korbanos] on a bamah... in order that they may fully enlisted in the service of Hashem. [This was] on account of what had been ingrained in them from the services of other religions, leading them to think that Hashem would not be for them as a God if they did not serve Him in this way.

We see that the Ralbag clearly distinguishes between korbanos offered in the Beis Hamikdash, where their service relates to the secrets of Creation, and those offered on bamos, which exist solely to enlist the people fully in the service of Hashem in a manner to which they could relate.

Indeed, the Meshech Chochmah writes that this distinction is to be found in the Mishnah itself, for this is the meaning of the statement of the Mishnah in Zevachim (113a) that a private altar does not have the effect of “*reyach nichoach* – a pleasing aroma.” The idea of *reyach nichoach* reflects all the positive and pleasing spiritual effects of bringing a korban. These exist only in korbanos brought in the Beis Hamikdash.

Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen

With the above idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the famous opinion of one of the Baalei HaTosafos, Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen. The Mishnah (Zevachim 112b) informs us that bamos were only permitted prior to the time that the Beis Hamikdash was built. After that, korbanos could only be offered in the Beis Hamikdash. With regards to the permissibility of bamos after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, a simple reading of the Gemara (Megillah 10a) would seem to indicate that it is dependent on the question as to whether the sanctity that was imbued in the location of the Mikdash was for all time (קידשה לעתיד לבא) or only for the duration of its existence (קידשה לשעתה). If it was the former, then bamos

would remain prohibited, while if it was the latter, they would again be permitted.

However, Tosafos (Ibid. s.v. *u'mai taama*) cite Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen as saying that even if the sanctity of the Mikdash was only temporary and no longer remains, bamos are nevertheless prohibited in our times. What is the basis of this prohibition?

The Gemara elsewhere (Yoma 69b) informs us that at the beginning of the time of the second Beis Hamikdash, the Anshei Knesses Hagedolah (Men of the Great Assembly) eradicated the yetzer hara for idol-worship. As such, since the institution of bamos existed solely for the purpose of preventing the Jewish people from lapsing into the pagan practices of other religions, with the concern for such a lapse having been nullified, bamos no longer serve any purpose and thus remain forbidden!

In Tehillim

The Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain how this distinction between bamos and the Beis Hamikdash can be seen in the words of Tehillim. In chapter 51, David Hamelech states:

כִּי לֹא תִחְפֹּץ יְבֹחַ וְאֶתְנָה עֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה.

For You [Hashem] do not desire a sacrifice, that I would give it, a burnt-offering You do not want. (51:18)

This verse expresses the idea that a sacrifice per se, e.g. one that is offered on a bamah, is not something for which Hashem has an essential desire. However, two verses later, David entreats Hashem to build the Beis Hamikdash:

הִיטִיבָה בְּרִצּוֹנָךְ אֶת-צִיּוֹן תִּבְנֶה חוֹמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם.

Do good in Your favor unto Zion, build the walls of Jerusalem. cc

With the Beis Hamikdash having been built, the setting will then exist where korbanos can fulfill their spiritual function of aligning the different spheres of Creation and bringing blessing into the world – and will therefore be something that Hashem desires for their intrinsic value. Thus, David concludes:

אֲזַי תִּחְפֹּץ זֶיךָ יְיָ צֶדֶק עֹלָה וְכָלִיל.

Then You will desire the offerings of righteousness, a burnt-offering and a whole offering. (51:21)

As the Shabbos of Vayikra leads us into Purim this year, may the joy and celebration over

the eternity of the Jewish people lead us to merit the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash, the healing of our wounds, and the restoration of our national glory, which is the glory of Hashem.

1. See Moreh Nevuchim 3:32 and 46, (See also Rambam's Commentary to Maseches Avos 1:2, and Mishneh Torah Hilchos Me'ilah 8:8).
2. As the Meshech Chochmah describes it, ענין עלעקטרי רוחני, a form of "spiritual electricity."
3. Commentary to Vayikra 1:9.
4. Melachim I, Chap, 11, toeles 1.
5. And the requirement that a Kohen specifically do the avodah exists only when it is performed in the Beis Hamikdash, not with a bamah (Commentary of R' Yehuda Copperman).

Haftarat Vayikra: When Dreams Meet Reality: Do Sins Impact Status?

Rabbi Yehuda Turetsky (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarah, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

"Adam was called Adam even after he sinned, as Woman was called Woman after being expelled." (R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha)

"In the American Jewish community Orthodoxy is in the minority. Most people do not study Torah and most people do not observe all or even most of the mitzvot. A recent poll proves, to our chagrin, that the highest percentage of those who do not believe in God come from the Jewish community. How then, under such conditions, can we say that it is we who are to teach Godliness to others? Does not the idea of the chosen people, in our times, become totally irrelevant? Permit me to propose an answer..." (R. Norman Lamm)

The Jewish people are told numerous times in Tanakh that they are a chosen people, a "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation" (Shemot 19:6), "singled out of all the families on the earth" (Amos 3:2). The significance of this special status has been debated for centuries, and there remains no universally accepted perspective on its precise meaning and influence. Nevertheless, its primary role in Jewish thought is clear, with some more recent scholars arguing for an increased emphasis on its importance in modern times. Indeed, it appears self-evident that regardless of how one understands why the Jews are chosen, God's choice of the Jews indicates there is something unique and special about them.

Yet, while the Jews have offered considerable contributions to mankind, they have not always lived up to this ambitious ideal. The prophets continually rebuke the Jewish people for their sins, and the continued state of exile is viewed by Chazal (Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1) as an indication that the Jews remain unworthy of meriting a temple. Clearly, while this nation may be unique, its actions have not always met expectations. How is one to understand that? What impact does sin have on the Jewish people? Is it a cataclysmic occurrence, impacting their position and standing, or do the Jews remain essentially the same as before, unaffected by their less than ideal behavior?

This tension emerges most clearly in the words of Yeshayahu that make up Parashat Vayikra's haftarah. The haftarah begins on a positive note, in which the Jewish people are informed that they were created as a separate nation to fulfill a specific purpose (Yeshayahu 43:21): "I created this nation for Me so that they may praise Me." Yeshayahu then shifts tones, rebuking the nation for their sins and failure to offer sacrifices according to Halakhah. Yeshayahu (43:27) even states that not only have the people sinned, but they come from sinners, as well: "Your first father sinned, and your intercessors have transgressed against Me." Eventually, though, Yeshayahu reassures the nation that Hashem will help them return and facilitate an ultimate redemption; God continues to love his people despite their sins, and they remain chosen even with their failures.

To relate to this tension, it is critical to ascertain the extent to which behavior impacts status. In other words, to what degree can the Jew's position be altered? As will be shown, the implications of these issues are numerous, and relate to both the Jew as an individual and the Jewish people as a whole. From the perspective of the individual, there are implications with regards to determining halakhic status, as well as implications with regards to the meaning and goal of repentance. For the community, answering these questions will help determine the extent to which the Jews can remain chosen despite a history filled with sins, and may help clarify the precise goal of the Jews' historical mission.

To address this overall topic, we will explore three separate issues, followed by a concluding thought. We will first outline two very different perspectives as to how to relate to sin, as well as the precise nature of repentance. We will then examine the question of status – is status flexible and wavering, or impervious to change? The article's

final section will use Yeshayahu's words in this haftarah to elucidate two approaches to relating to the impact of sin on the individual and Jewish people as a whole. We will conclude the article by offering a more nuanced perspective towards understanding the precise influence of sin, and the purpose of repentance.

Sin and Repentance

Sin and repentance are deeply personal matters, which have been analyzed and discussed from various perspectives. However, while there are numerous elements and possible facets involved, there appear to be two very different orientations with regards to their relationship. One view is to understand sin as a cataclysmic occurrence. Sin does not just impact one's reward and punishment; it influences who the sinner is, and changes the sinner's essence and identity. If so, repentance may demand not just regret over an inappropriate act, but necessitate a change into a "different person."

This view finds support in certain Kabbalistic works, and may emerge from Rambam's view of repentance. He writes (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:4):

It is of the ways of repentance, that the penitent shouts out regularly before God with cries and supplications, performing tzedakah in line with his capabilities, distancing himself far from the matter of his sin, and changing his name, thereby saying, "I am another man, and not the man who did those acts, and he changes all his actions to good and to an upright path..."

Rambam apparently understands that repentance requires one to essentially become "another man," a different person from the one who committed the sin.

An alternative perspective emerges from the quote of R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha cited above. By noting that Adam and Chava keep their names after sinning, he expresses the view that sin is not transformative. True, sin should not be committed, and goes against a Divine command, but sin does not radically impact a person's identity. Given that perspective, one could argue that repentance comes to undo a wrong action, but does not change personal status, since one remains essentially the same person. Alternatively, and possibly more likely, it may lead to a view whereby the goal of repentance is not to change one's identity, but to "return" to one's true character. Sin is an aberration that obscures a person's inner self from emerging.

A most articulate presentation of this view is offered by R. Jonathan Sacks in the name of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

“Repentance” in Hebrew is not teshuvah, but charatah. Not only are these two terms not synonymous. They are opposites. Charatah implies remorse or a feeling of guilt about the past and an intention to behave in a completely new way in the future. The person decides to become “a new man.” But teshuvah means “returning” to the old, to one’s original nature. Underlying the concept of teshuvah is the fact that the Jew is, in essence, good. Desires or temptations may deflect him temporarily from being himself, being true to his essence. But the bad that he does is not part of, nor does it affect, his real nature. Teshuvah is a return to the self. While repentance involves dismissing the past and starting anew, teshuvah means going back to one’s roots in G-d and exposing them as one’s true character.

What have emerged are two very different perspectives as to the impact of sin and the function of repentance. One views sin as transformative to a person’s identity, and therefore understands repentance as a requirement to become “another person,” while the other minimizes the impact of sin and may argue for a repentance that requires the opposite; it demands not that one change into a new person but instead that one return to one’s true identity.

Flexible Status: Are We Always God’s Children?

Support for these two perspectives on the effects of sin may be found in a discussion in the Talmud regarding Jewish status. The Talmud (Kiddushin 36a) cites a debate about the scope of the Torah’s statement that the Jews are God’s children (Devarim 14:1). R. Yehudah maintains that a Jew is only God’s child when he behaves appropriately and in a manner befitting an obedient child. For him, status is based on conduct; it is earned and not inherited. Such an approach is easily justified if one maintains that sin changes one’s identity.

R. Meir disagrees and argues that Jews always remain God’s children. Personal piety has no impact on individual status; rather, biology is the key determinant. For him, sin cannot influence the intrinsic holiness inside the Jew. Taken at face value, the Talmud offers two radically different approaches to a Jew’s status, one impervious and resistant to change and another flexible and wavering, each possibly reflecting one of the perspectives outlined above about the nature of sin’s impact on the Jews.

There are, however, those that limit the scope of this debate, arguing that R. Yehudah and R. Meir should be interpreted in more limited fashions. If so, it may be necessary to develop a more nuanced approach towards understanding the impact of sin on personal identity. Rashba (Shut Rashba 1:194) maintains that even R.

Meir agrees that one’s status can be lost with regards to certain halakhot. For example, a sinner always retains his ability to create a halakhic marriage and divorce, but in some circumstances one may lend money to a sinner with interest, something normally prohibited. Some offer a more sweeping characterization of a sinner’s status, whereby one’s independent status as a Jew persists, while one’s national identity disappears. For proponents of this approach, the categories of being a Jew and being part of the Jewish people are not the same. A Jew is imbued with a special sanctity that can never be removed, but being part of the national identity is less certain and depends on one’s lifestyle and ideals.

Sefat Emet (Parashat Re’ei, 5645) offers a more mystical perspective to this debate. He argues that Jews have a unique and special soul that can never be lost, but the Jewish body only receives a certain status when the Jew observes God’s commands. According to this view, then, one may suggest that R. Yehudah and R. Meir debate the impact of the special soul on the Jewish body. R. Meir maintains that the soul and body are always intertwined and linked, whereas R. Yehudah argues that soul only impacts body when the Jew acts like God’s obedient child. For R. Yehudah, then, what appears to emerge is a difference between a Jew’s intrinsic sanctity, which cannot be diminished, and additional levels of sanctity that are conditional.

If one accepts these nuanced approaches, it becomes apparent that numerous perspectives exist. There are not just two distinct views, one arguing that sin cannot impact status because the Jew always remains holy, and another believing that sin can completely undermine personal standing. Instead, there may be a range of views, each requiring separate analysis. To highlight two specific perspectives towards understanding why sin may not be able to undermine the Jew’s special status, we will now turn to Yeshayahu’s words in this haftarah.

Keeping Identity: Two Perspectives in Yeshayahu

Yeshayahu not only informs the Jewish people that they are chosen, but also why they are chosen. He tells the Jews that God created them so that they would praise Him. As noted above, these words of Yeshayahu can be used to highlight two different views as to why sin cannot undermine status:

An Inherent Sanctity

Yeshayahu tells the Jews that they were not merely separated at a later point in history after numerous years

of existence – the Jews were created for the purpose of praising God, thereby making it increasingly more likely that the impact of their being chosen is fundamental to their very existence. Sefat Emet invokes this verse in numerous places, arguing that it highlights how the primary purpose of Creation was for the Jews. Most critical for the question at hand, Sefat Emet cites this verse as an indication that all Jews are connected, in a certain sense, to Hashem and His Torah. Even though Jews may sin, they remain at their core connected with the Divine; built into them and their creation is this strong connection to Hashem. What may, therefore, emerge, is a perspective that argues that Jews remain chosen despite their sins because at their core they are holy. There is an intrinsic sanctity within them that never wavers, and a fundamental connection built into them that cannot be swayed.

Working with an essentialist perspective on chosenness, R. Kook appears to develop a similar approach (Orot Yisrael 5:7).

One might think that the entire difference between Israel and the nations is that difference [in the realm of action] which is given prominence by the active observance of mitzvot... This view is mistaken... It is the element of neshamah that sets Israel's character apart as a distinct unit, unique in the world. From that difference spring all the differences in behavior [i.e., mitzvot], and even when these last are impaired [by lack of observance], that impairment cannot touch the... psychic element from which they derive. Therefore the difference between Israel and the nations will remain forever.

Because what separates Jews and non-Jews for R. Kook is not action or behavior, but soul and essential character; he argues that the Jew remains distinct even when not observant or externally pious. The soul remains the same, separate from the rest of humanity. In another context, R. Kook, similar to Sefat Emet, also argues that all Jews, including heretics, are filled with faith and are connected to Hashem.

This view accepts the above perspective that sin cannot impact the holiness found within each Jew, and it would likely align with the approach outlined above that true repentance involves returning to one's true self and allowing one's inner sanctity to flourish. From this perspective, the Jews as a whole remain chosen for the same reason that sin cannot undermine the sanctity of an individual Jew.

Not all accept the above approaches, be it the fundamental approach that argues for an essentialist perspective to chosenness, or the more extreme

formulations that argue for a strong Divine connection for even the most heretical of Jews. However, there is an additional element of Yeshayahu's words to the Jewish people, one that offers another reason why the Jews can remain chosen and a different perspective on sin and repentance.

A Historical Mission

As mentioned above, Yeshayahu informs the Jewish people that they were selected for a purpose, to praise Hashem. Interestingly, while emphasizing the role of mission and purpose could lead to a more flexible Jewish status, Yeshayahu appears to endorse a different view in this haftarah. He begins by informing the Jews that they are singled out for a mission, and continues, just a few verses later, to emphasize that they remain chosen despite their sins. Apparently, the special status remains intact even if the mission for which they were selected remains unaccomplished. It is God's charge to praise Him that makes the Jews chosen, not whether they fulfill that command.

It is easier to understand why this would be when chosenness is interpreted as a purpose instead of a privilege, and a responsibility rather than a right. The Jewish people are chosen not because of their biology or genealogy, but because they are supposed to fulfill a mission. If they fail to do so, that charge still remains, and if anything, the mission becomes all the more critical. The world needs what the Jewish people are supposed to offer, a life predicated on higher calling and reflecting a desire to praise Hashem. In other words, a chosenness dependent on responsibility can remain, despite a history of sin, because the mission creates our status, and the mission is a continual one.

When applied to the individual Jew, this perspective offers an interesting approach to the impact of sin. There's no guarantee that one can withstand the impact of iniquities; they may alter one's identity and therefore demand a repentance that comes with becoming "another person." There's no assumption of an essentialist viewpoint to Jewish sanctity. However, that need not impact a person's status as chosen. The sense of mission and purpose remains despite personal failures, and one can always remain chosen even if there's a need to reinvent and reorient oneself towards a more ambitious religious lifestyle.

Conclusion: Two Aspects to Chosenness

While Yeshayahu appears to endorse the position that the

Jewish people always remain chosen, a failure to observe God's commands may create distance between God and the Jews. In other words, Yeshayahu is correct when he tells the Jewish people that no bill of divorce has been given (Yeshayahu 50:1), but that does not mean that there is no separation. Indeed, it was noted above that nuanced perspectives exist regarding an individual Jew's status, whereby one can be a full Jew but not part of the Jewish people, or filled with a Jewish soul, but without a Jewish body.

How is one to understand that?

R. Norman Lamm (ibid.) distinguishes between two facets of chosenness, that of God choosing the Jews, and that of the Jews choosing God. He argues, "chosenness has both obligations and privileges, difficulties and joys. The negative features – the responsibilities and the agonies – derive from God's choice of us; the positive aspects – the sense of privilege and the delight – come from our choice of Him."

It seems possible to suggest that much of the nuance in assessing the impact of sin derives from this distinction. Yeshayahu reminds the Jews that they are always chosen by God. But if one only has that element of chosenness, it can feel like a burden. In line with the Rashba's approach mentioned above, it can lead to an individual's distance from the rest of the Jewish people and the sense of isolation and frustration that comes from viewing one's state as a challenge and not a gift. From the Sefat Emet's perspective, it may mean that the special soul will stay inside, and not permeate one's body. Not embracing one's status allows it to remain hidden, since it lacks the room necessary to flourish and develop.

True, one remains chosen despite sin, and selected from the rest of humanity even with failures, but being completely chosen demands a commitment and acceptance of that special state. It requires recognition that a life of chosenness is a life filled with joy, opportunity, and meaning. It is a life where one is close to the Divine, and lives an inspired life filled with a constant sense of purpose.

Working with R. Lamm's approach, one may argue for an additional perspective on the impact of sin and the meaning of repentance. Sins are not only individual acts of rebellion against God. They serve as a statement that the sinner has not chosen God. If so, authentic repentance may require not only regret over the act on the part of the sinner, but changing one's orientation to effectively choose God. It requires shifting perspectives, and living a more ambitious religious life.

Yeshayahu informs the Jews that they will always remain chosen. But that is not enough. To maximize their potential and fulfill their national destiny, they must also choose God. When that is done, the Jewish people will not only have achieved the goals set forth for them, but they will have encouraged and inspired the rest of the world, as well. As Yeshayahu describes, there will be a time when all will merit a closer connection to the Divine. Our inner sanctity will finally flourish and our sacred mission will be fully accomplished. "For the Earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Yeshayahu 11:9).

